

**Dalton, Russell J., David M. Farrell, and Ian McAllister. 2011. *Political Parties and Democratic Linkage: How Parties Organize Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 272 pages. ISBN: 9780199599356**

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A great deal of ink has been spilled by journalists and political pundits alike on the problems that the alleged 'crisis of the party' generates for contemporary representative democracies. In "Political Parties and Democratic Linkage", Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister take issue with this defeatist point of view. Their book is nothing short of an ambitious attempt to scrutinize and reevaluate all the linkages between citizens, parties, and policy outputs that make up the so-called "Responsible Party Model of Democracy" ("RPM", which they refer to as the "Party Government Model"). However, the book – while indeed an important counterpoint – is unable to completely fulfill its great expectations.

The gist of the argument is that notions of the decline or crisis of parties are greatly exaggerated because the adoptions of parties to changing political and societal circumstances are not taken into consideration. Like Mair and Katz in their influential work on the emergence of the "Cartel Party", Dalton and colleagues caution against the usage of a particular model of democracy based on an idealized mass party as an implicit standard for the evaluation of more recent developments. Rather, they assert that while the habitat surrounding parties may have led to new structures, parties have adopted accordingly and still fulfill the five linkage-functions that make up the chain of the "Responsible Party Model": They still 1) dominate the recruitment of political personnel and are in charge of the electoral process (campaign linkage); 2) mobilize voters (participatory linkage); 3) inform voters about policy choices and present the alternatives that

structure vote preferences (ideological linkage); 4) achieve a "good" congruence between citizen policy preferences and the ideological composition of parliament and government (representative linkage); and 5) fulfill their programmatic promises once in office (policy linkage). In order to make those claims, they make use of the wide-ranging survey-data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) project and, when necessary, complement it with data on party positions and OECD data. The second module of the CSES includes data on 36 established and new democracies, collected directly after elections between 2001 and 2006.

The first chapter on the campaign linkage seeks to show that parties still dominate the electoral process and entails three major findings. First, the authors find that ballot access depends on the parties as gatekeepers that control nomination, though they also concede that candidate selection processes are increasingly becoming more open. Second, looking at campaign communication and media access, the authors stress that party representatives and parties are still the prime actors. Based on frequencies of media appearances and mentions, this may seem a stark conclusion. The interpretation of the emergence of paid political advertising and TV debates as indications of a friendlier media-environment seems equally disputable, especially as the authors do not mention the implications of increased horse-race journalism for the communication strategies of parties. Third, the authors convincingly argue that a dramatic expansion of public party finance in

combination with a "light-touch regulation regime" have helped parties to compensate financial losses due to the erosion of membership.

Concerning the second linkage of mobilization, the authors acknowledge that party membership and turnout have declined. However, based on evidence that parties' campaign activities crucially affect turnout and the notion that voting is still the most common form of political action, they emphasize the enduring mobilization potential of parties.

The discussion of the ideological linkage is separated into three subsections. First, the authors present evidence that across all countries around 90 percent of respondents are able to locate themselves on a left-right scale ranging from 1 to 10. Second, they show that 82 percent of the citizenry in old and new democracies are able to locate the two biggest parties on this scale. Third, and following their expectations, the authors find that left-right orientations have a systematic effect on vote choice and that this link is stronger where party polarization is higher. They conclude that the ideological linkage is still intact, as voters hold meaningful issue positions, are able to make judgments about which party best represents their preferences, and cast their vote accordingly based on policy-matters. While the presented evidence for this policy-centered view of electoral choice is for the most part very persuasive, within the broad audience to which that Dalton and colleagues wish to appeal, readers who are unfamiliar with the conventions of electoral research may be put off by the underlying conceptualization of left-right as a super-issue of political competition devoid of (fixed) substantial meaning. Political competition is regarded as meaningful because it is structured by left-right orientations, and left-right placements, in turn, are meaningful because they affect voting behavior. Whether this inference is perceived as a tautology probably depends on one's views on the origins of left-right self-placements.

In the chapter on representational linkage, the authors interestingly depart from the idea of cross-sectional congru-

ence of median-voter and median-citizen left-right placements on the one hand and the position of the government on the other hand as the prime criterion for interest representation. Rather, they build on the notion of "dynamic representation" and claim that citizens reach representation via party alternation across time. In that sense, elections are understood as mechanisms that steer governments in the direction of the median citizen (or median voter).

Given the authors' aspiration to shed light on the entire causal chain underlying the RPM, the chapter on policy linkage surely is a neuralgic point. The chapter departs from a short discussion of party cohesion as a requirement for partisan effects and finds that cohesion is high and even increasing in established democracies; in newer democracies this trend is less pronounced. In what follows, the policy responsiveness of governments is tested with regard to education, health, and social expenditures, both as a cross-section and longitudinally. The cross-sectional analysis finds a modest effect of left-right placements on expenditures. Likewise, the cross-temporal relationship between changes in government and expenditures reveals that increases are consistently higher for left governments. These results, however, must be taken with a grain of salt, as only 10 governments exhibit ideological alternation in the six years covered by the investigation. This small-n problem may also be the reason why none of the constraints on government policies mentioned in the theoretical discussion is considered in the actual analysis. With regard to the dependent variable, the authors are fully aware that expenditures as dependent variable are not perfectly suited to assess the policy-impact of partisanship. It is thus somewhat surprising that the authors speak of "clear evidence" for the politics matter hypothesis and of "outputs broadly consistent with the ideological profiles of the parties that form them" (218). Overall, the chapter on policy linkage is most instructive when evidence from other (meta-) studies is cited, although relatively little attention is devoted to studies that cast doubt on the output- and outcome relevance of party politics.

The Conclusion entails a rather brief assessment of the question how parties have retained their dominant position and how they have reacted to decreased membership, eroding partisanship, and diminished room of maneuver. As an institutional response, major parties have tied state resources such as TV ads and funding to performance in past elections to prevent the entry of new parties and to make up for declining member fees. As a programmatic response, they have adapted to new issues to prevent new parties from exploiting their potential. Organizationally, parties have reacted to decreasing membership with trial- and cyber-membership; and when in government, they have tried to uphold the level of party discipline via sanctions or the exclusion of contentious issues.

Given the mammoth task the authors have taken on, it comes as no surprise that it is necessary to point to some limitations, problems, and potential extensions of their work. One problem is that the standard against which the authors measure the evidence is not always clear. Occasionally, they acknowledge signs of displacement but retreat to the position that parties are still important – a view that few scholars would object to. A related problem is that they frequently approach questions that are implicitly about changes in time with cross-sectional data. With regard to the theoretical contribution of the book, it is not entirely clear which of the conflicting perspectives on parties and party systems change is supported. While the book entails arguments compatible with

the idea of dealignment between societal groups and parties or even the cartelization of parties, its strong impetus on parties' adaptive capacities suggests that they could be able to forge new alignments. What is largely missing in the discussion of the changing habitat of parties is the penetration of parties by organized interests and lobbyists and the resulting consequences for the RPM. Another interesting potential extension concerns the conceptualization of the political space. Conceivably, the consideration of multidimensionality and hence the consideration of the dilemmas faced by cross-pressured voters would make it more difficult to sustain the authors' optimism about representation.

Despite these limitations, "Political Parties and Democratic Linkage" remains an important voice of dissent. The authors remind us that it is not structures per se, but the functions that ultimately matter for assessing the role of parties. Their study has a broad appeal and cuts across the narrow confines of compartmentalized academic niches within which the different linkages are usually investigated separately. Of course, breadth comes at the price of depth – not all readers, particularly those critical of the persistent validity of the "Responsible Party Model", will agree with the optimistic reading of the evidence. Nevertheless, Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister provide an interesting compendium of recent developments and even readers who hold a rather bleak outlook on the role of parties will find surprising information in the plethora of data they present.

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